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THOMAS JEFFERSON

AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE

IROQUOIS CLUB

APRIL 13TH, 1901

BY S. S. GREGORY
OF CHICAGO

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Mr. President and Gentlemen:

We have recently celebrated the centennial anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's first inauguration.

That event may be not inappropriately taken as the beginning of that great party with which we are identified—a party, the dissolution of which, has been repeatedly prophesied by enemies and feared by its friends; but which, vitalized by those eternal principles of truth, of justice and of popular liberty with which the name and fame of its founder are inseparably associated, still survives, undaunted by defeat, assured in a glorious past, hopeful and confident of a useful and splendid future.

It is not necessary on this occasion to rehearse the familiar story of Jefferson's life. Born with many advantages, he acquired a liberal education, being not merely deeply versed in mathematics and the sciences, but a profound student of the classics as well, and proficient in several modern languages. Having acquired a legal education he entered upon the practice of the law with great diligence and assi-

duity, and although but little gifted as a speaker, met with great success in this exacting profession.

But if it be true that John Marshall was born to be the Chief Justice of any nation of which he was a citizen, Thomas Jefferson was not less inevitably predestined to be the great lawgiver and legislator of any land which claimed him as her son. His was one of those rare minds that can not only evolve and proclaim in perspicuous, attractive and convincing form the general and fundamental principles of free government, but can also elaborate these ideas in the concrete form of positive legislation.

He was the great apostle of American liberty and of popular government. At the age of 33 he penned the immortal Declaration; and there laid down the principles of government which always controlled his public conduct—for unlike some modern statesmen he did not avow generous and benevolent sentiments only to ruthlessly disregard them in official conduct. At the age of 26 he introduced into the House of Burgesses of Virginia, a bill giving slave owners a right, not before possessed, to manumit their slaves —though then defeated it was passed in 1782.

In 1776 he brought in a bill to abolish all entails in Virginia, which was carried. As one of the revisers of the statutes of that State, he secured, in 1777, the abolition of all rights of primogeniture; thus, by these two measures, abolishing those unjust and distinctive features of the aristocratical and feudal system of land tenures which had obtained in England.

He labored manfully for separation of church and State and the complete establishment of religious freedom, and drew the bill upon that subject, which, with minor changes, was finally adopted in 1786.

He prepared a bill for free common schools, and one for the prompt naturalization of foreigners, which a hostile biographer declares, was too Democratic. The latter was carried, but the former, though excellent, accurate and comprehensive, was never fully adopted.

He ameliorated the criminal code securing the abolition of capital punishment for all crimes, save treason and murder.

He was the first great emancipator; when acting as reviser of the laws of his State, he advocated legislation, securing the freedom of all born in slavery after a certain day, and also providing for their deportation. Writing on this subject subsequently he says, with remarkable prescience: "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, can not live in the same government."

In 1779, while Governor of Virginia, he took formal possession of the Western territory claimed by that State, including the territory west from the south line of Virginia to the Mississippi. This embraces the Northwest territory ceded by Virginia to the Nation March 1, 1784, including the present States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and a part of Minnesota.

In 1784 he drew the report of a committee of Congress for a plan of temporary government for the Western territory. Mr. Webster tells us that Nathan Dane was the author of the celebrated ordinance of 1787 for the government of the Northwest territory. However this may be, this report by Mr. Jefferson was the original of that ordinance. In it, after providing for the creation of States out of this territory, was this provision: "That after the year 1800 of

the Christian era there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said States, otherwise than in punishment of crimes, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted to have been personally guilty." This clause then failed of adoption because a majority of the States did not vote for it; but it is found almost literally in Section 6 of the famous ordinance of 1787 already referred to.

Some of Jefferson's petty critics seem to have been almost as much impressed with the rather fantastic nomenclature suggested by him in respect of the States thus contemplated, as with this noble and statesmanlike provision in favor of human liberty.

To this one clause more than to any other single thing, we owe the fact that this did not become a slave-holding nation. That a public man from Virginia, the stronghold of slavery, himself an owner of slaves, should have imposed such a bar to that institution in this imperial domain, singles him out as one of those rare spirits, who, rising above the trammels of place and time, can grasp eternal truth and, with commanding view, survey the mighty perspective of a nation's future.

I pause with this brief and wholly inadequate review of his career as a lawgiver, to comment upon the astounding fact that he has been continually held up to view by a large class of apparently otherwise intelligent thinkers, speakers and writers as an erratic political visionary on whom they have derisively bestowed the appellation, philosopher. That all of the generous and noble visions, cherished in his warm and benevolent heart for the welfare of his country and his kind, were not realized, is too true. That sometimes he advocated them in a manner that seemed extravagant, may perhaps, be conceded. But what American statesman of the

most practical and sordid school can be suggested, who accomplished a respectable fraction of what this great man achieved in the domain of practical legislation and administration? The proudest and greatest achievements of such as these shrivel and wither into insignificance in comparison. There is but one American statesman whom I would class with him in this regard, that great, humane, liberty-loving son of Illinois, and, in lineage, of Virginia as well, Abraham Lincoln.

Jefferson, with that practical talent which his detractors deny, but which was one of his most marked characteristics, reduced the rules of parliamentary procedure to a system, and wrote a treatise on parliamentary law which has been the standard authority on the subject since.

He secured the adoption of the dollar as the unit of value, proposing a gold piece of $10, a silver dollar, a silver tenth of a dollar and a copper hundredth of a dollar. This system was adopted and with some additions, we still retain it.

He urged freedom of commerce in a report to Congress on Commerce in 1793, while he was Secretary of State, in these sensible words: "Instead of embarrassing commerce under piles of regulating laws, duties and prohibitions, could it be relieved of all its shackles in all parts of the world; could every country be employed in producing that which nature has best fitted it to produce, and each be free to exchange with others, mutual surpluses for mutual wants, the greatest mass possible would then be produced of those things which contribute to human life and human happiness."

It is not difficult to imagine what would be the policy of such a man toward those of foreign birth who should seek in this land that liberty and opportunity which they could

not elsewhere find; indeed, it was under his inspiration that the great Democratic party adopted that policy in State and Federal legislation which has made this land, in the sneering phrase of our opponents, " an asylum for the oppressed of all nations."

Shortly after his first inauguration, in response to an address from the foreign born residents of Beaver county, Pennsylvania, he said:

" Born in other countries, yet believing you could be happy in this, our laws acknowledge, as they should do, your right to join us in society, conforming, as I doubt not, you will do, to our established rules. That these rules shall be as equal as prudential considerations will admit, will certainly be the aim of our legislatures, general and particular. To unequal privileges among members of the same society the spirit of our nation is with one accord averse."

In his first annual message he recommended a change in the laws adopted during Mr. Adams' administration prescribing a residence of fourteen years before an alien could become a citizen. I suppose this was one of those great acts of constructive statesmanship for which Mr. Hamilton's admirers accord him credit. It was there he used the expression, "Shall oppressed humanity find no asylum on this globe?" and recommended that citizenship be extended under proper restrictions, to every one manifesting a *bona fide* purpose of residing here permanently.

Under his influence at the first session of Congress during his first administration, Congress secured the right of press reporters on the floor of both houses. True to their unrepublican instincts, the Federalists opposed this. It seems, perhaps, an unimportant incident; yet it is not so.

On the contrary, it is vital that every act of our public servants should be performed under the public eye. And the right of the press representatives to attend upon Congress is essential to secure this end. Prior to the action referred to, reporters were admitted only on sufferance, and the Speaker of the House had expelled two for reporting speeches too literally, among these being one of his own.

We now hear much of the Monroe doctrine. No one would wish to deprive James Monroe, that true Democrat and sterling patriot, of any of his just laurels; yet it is a fact that on October 29, 1808, during his second administration, Mr. Jefferson wrote the Governor of Louisiana, as follows: "The patriots of Spain have no warmer friends than the administration of the United States, but it is our duty to say nothing and to do nothing for or against either. If they succeed we shall be well satisfied to see Cuba and Mexico remain in their present dependence; but very unwilling to see them in that of either France or England, politically or commercially. We consider their interests and ours as the same, and that *the object of both must be to exclude all European interference from this hemisphere.*"

The Monroe doctrine in all its extent is fully set forth in a letter from Mr. Jefferson to Mr. Monroe while the latter was President, dated October 24, 1828.

In that letter he used this memorable language:

"Our first and fundamental maxim should be never to entangle ourselves in the broils of Europe. Our second, never to suffer Europe to intermeddle with cisatlantic affairs."

The Monroe doctrine was formally promulgated by the President in his message to Congress of December 2nd, following.

I have not deemed it advisable to enter, in any detail, upon the story of Jefferson's labors in behalf of American liberty and independence prior to the Revolution. Suffice it to say that he was one of the first, if not the first, to declare that the English Parliament had no right to govern the colonies.

In 1774 he proposed certain instructions to the delegates to be sent from Virginia to the Continental Congress. These were republished in England and, dealing with the whole question of the relations of the colonies to that country, were so radical that Mr. Jefferson's name was included in a bill of attainder proposed in Parliament, but afterward abandoned.

He supported Patrick Henry resolutely, and consistently insisted upon independence, with separation as an unsought alternative.

Jefferson had no part in framing the Constitution. He criticised it mildly for not making the President ineligible to re-election and as lacking a Bill of Rights. The latter was at once supplied by the first ten amendments, and he then gave it his cordial support. But while he was not concerned in framing the organic law of the nation, that finds its basis in those principles of freedom and liberty with which his writings, more than those of any other one person, had inspired the hearts and minds of the colonists.

I will make no attempt to further deal with the record of his administrative career, either as Governor of Virginia, Secretary of State, or President. But as an illustration of those qualities of practical statesmanship which his detractors find so essentially wanting, the Louisiana purchase is instructive. By this acquisition we gained, by treaty, with France, the

territory now included in Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, the Dakotas, Montana, the greater part of Minnesota, Nebraska, Indian Territory, nearly all of Kansas, and parts of Wyoming, Colorado, and, I think, Idaho. He doubted the constitutional power to acquire this mighty empire, but his strong practical sense led him to subordinate these doubts in view of the tremendous importance of this acquisition. In fact, he was wrong in his theory, but sound in his practical course; and wonderfully has the nation grown and profited by it. It is an event worthy of the great national celebration to be held in our sister city of St. Louis; and this commemoration will arouse the present generation to some due appreciation of this great incident in our national history, and doubtless inspire a renewed interest in the life and character of the great statesman under whose administration this vast empire was acquired.

Mr. Jefferson was the founder of the University of Virginia, one of the great seats of learning in our land; and he was always the friend and patron of learning and the liberal arts.

I have thus, after most meager fashion, briefly sketched some of the achievements which justify the high place accorded to this great man in the history of mankind, by those at least of his own political faith. Perhaps something may be added upon his character and general views.

That which must first impress every intelligent student of his life, is his ardent devotion to liberty; liberty of thought, of speech, of action, of trade.

When he was first elected, soon after the notorious and tyrannical alien and sedition laws, a part of Hamilton's great constructive system to which the latter seemed especially

attached, the universal popular acclaim was "For Jefferson and Liberty."

In a letter to Mr. Stuart of Virginia, dated December 23, 1791, on the expediency of framing a new constitution for the State, he said: "I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty, than those attending too small a degree of it." This was his rule of public and practical conduct all through life.

Closely related to it was his confidence and trust in the people and in their capacity for self government, a matter in which he differed most radically from his great contemporary and political antagonist, Alexander Hamilton. Fortunate indeed is it for the American people and the cause of civil liberty, that his views prevailed and not those of Hamilton who, I digress to observe, never believed in universal suffrage, and while constant in praise of the British constitution, was sedulous against those liberalizing influences, which in that empire have transformed its government into a form far more popular, at the present time, than we have any reason to suppose Hamilton had any faith or confidence in.

A biographer, by no means partial, says of Jefferson that he "was the true friend of the commonalty. While he regarded their welfare as the noblest object of government, he did not confer benefits upon them as boons, like a political charity done by superiors to inferiors. He believed in them; he esteemed their intelligence; he not only respected their power, but he desired to see them use it, because he was firmly convinced that they would use it well."

It is interesting to compare Hamilton's view, stated in his own language: "Nothing is more fallacious than to expect to produce any valuable or permanent results in polit-

ical projects by relying merely on the reason of men. Men are rather reasoning than reasonable animals, for the most part governed by the impulse of passion."

I can not refrain in this connection from quoting a few sentences from Jefferson's first inaugural:

"Sometimes it is said that man can not be trusted with the government of himself. Can he then be trusted with the government of others? Or, have we found angels in the forms of Kings to govern him? Let history answer this question."

I will refer in the third place to but one further trait of this great man's character; his spotless integrity, both personal and political. He once said: "The great principles of right and wrong are legible to every reader; to pursue them requires not the aid of many counsellors. The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest."

On the 18th of March, 1797, writing to an unnamed correspondent, he says: "When I first entered on the stage of public life (now twenty-four years ago), I came to a resolution never to engage in any kind of enterprise for the improvement of my fortune, nor to wear any other character than that of a farmer."

This indeed, is astounding doctrine, and must seem quite revolutionary to Senators of the United States whose operations on Wall street and elsewhere, based on "inside information" derived from their official positions, or from persons who desire to stand well with them, are said to be extensive and sometimes not unprofitable. It would be interesting to have an expression from Mr. Hanna on this subject.

In a letter of September 9, 1792, to Washington, referring to Hamilton's influence on Congress, he said:

"I saw the influence actually produced, and its first fruits to be the establishment of the great outlines of his project by the votes of the very persons who, having swallowed his bait, were laying themselves out to profit by his plans; and that had these persons withdrawn, *as those interested in a question ever should,* the vote of the disinterested majority was clearly the reverse of what they made it."

Here again we have what seems like novel doctrine. There are many Senators of the United States under salary from large interests. Take for instance Mr. Depew, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the New York Central Railway Company, and Senator from the State of New York; when some question is pending in the Senate affecting railway interests, can he be expected to act impartially and solely from a due regard to the public welfare? There are numerous similar instances; yet no one has ever heard of one of these gentlemen asking to be excused from voting on the ground that he did not occupy such an attitude as permitted him to act with absolute impartiality.

Well would it be for the Republic could we return to the practice of these simple, honest, Jeffersonian principles.

The time is ripe for such a political revival. The traditions of the Republic are threatened. Under pretext of making this nation a world power, the party in power seems to contemplate an extensive colonial system, by which we shall assume to govern by the exercise of arbitrary power, millions of people without their consent. I denounce this attempt as unconstitutional, un-American and undemocratic. There is no room in our system for arbitrary power. It degrades and debases at once him who wields it and him who feels its burden. We can not, nay we ought not, to endure half slave and half free.

And what further? We see upon us a most insane, inordinate and well nigh universal greed for gain and the rapid creation of a plutocratic order of society, which by combination, by impudent and, too often, successful demands for governmental concession, by every form of exploitation of the people, is attaining, *per fas aut nefas*, a commercial, social and political power which seems to threaten the very foundations of civil society. To those in this order, public and personal integrity is but an empty name. That every man has his price they firmly believe; and their experience largely justifies their belief. They ascribe no honest nor creditable motive to him who seeks public office. They regard no law which they can successfully evade, and they possess the ability to paralyze the activities of those in public authority, on whom we rely to protect our rights. The watchmen sleep upon the towers.

The people must be aroused. Their faithless public servants must be cast out. They must assume that active supervision and control over public affairs which they have too long abdicated.

Beyond this first plain question of common honesty, other great questions loom up for consideration and determination.

Are the masses of mankind doomed forever to lives of the most exacting and unremitting toil, that a few captains of industry may accumulate fortunes so colossal as to stagger the imagination of men, and a few more live in luxury and idleness while their brothers toil and suffer and starve?

Shall the cry of the poor and the oppressed rise unanswered, save by the mournful and hopeless refrain, "thus it hath ever been? "

I can not answer; I can not say when nor how we shall inaugurate the political, social and moral regeneration of society.

But this I have to say:

Thomas Jefferson was a radical, not a conservative. The conservatives of his day hated and feared him. He was a bold, original and daring thinker. He looked forward and not backward.

We must follow his example. From the inspiration of his life and teachings we must gather that spirit of mental and moral hardihood which shall enable us to see that error, though hoary, is error still; that wrongs entrenched in laws, in social usage, in all the orders of the State, are yet wrongs. That if past remedies have not proven efficacious, new ones must be sought; and that the only sound maxim of government is *populi salus, lex suprema.* If vested rights obstruct, they must yield; if constitutions fetter, they must be changed; if social institutions block the way, they must be destroyed.

But I look neither for revolution nor for violence. I trust we shall be ruled neither by an emperor, nor a mob. For—

> "I doubt not through the ages
> One unceasing purpose runs,
> And the thoughts of men are widened
> With the process of the suns."

Thomas Jefferson sleeps at Monticello, that beautiful home 'mid the hills of his dear native State, where all the tender affections of his warm heart ever centered. He always left it with regret; he hastened to return to it, from the highest official station, with unfeigned joy and delight.

On his tomb is this inscription dictated by him some time before his death:

Here was buried
THOMAS JEFFERSON,
Author
of the DECLARATION OF
AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE
of
THE STATUTE OF VIRGINIA,
FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM and FATHER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA.

Far distant be the day when the American people shall cease to cherish his memory; and may the time never come when his influence shall not be a living, vital force in our national life.

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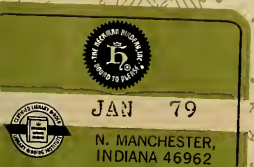

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